

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Torah-Based Community Organizing and Development

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First Steps to Explore Torah-Judaism

We have several suggestions that can ease the way forward for anyone who is considering additional Jewish education and practice, to go beyond the *siddur* (prayerbook) to study Judaism's other traditional books. Of course, there are myriad options to do that. Our view, however, is that whatever one ultimately decides is best, it is useful to begin by learning what the Torah tradition has to offer, because it has kept the Jewish people alive and thriving for thousands of years. Incidentally, the Hebrew word for "tradition" is *masorah*, that which is handed down from one to another, from parents to children, generation after generation.

The first practical step to begin exploring Torah-Judaism in greater depth is to break the *sefer* (book) barrier, to learn to read and translate Hebrew. Initially that involves "decoding"—that is, recognizing and pronouncing the individual letters and vowels of the Hebrew alphabet and then learning to pronounce them in combination as words. It may seem daunting if one hasn't previously learned a foreign language with a different alphabet, but virtually all our former students discovered it was amazingly simple and easy. It takes about an hour a day for a month. We recommend using a very popular little book, Noah Golinkin's *Shalom Aleichem* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1978), used copies of which are widely available for about \$12.

The next step is to learn the *meanings* of the Hebrew words, so one can read and understand the *siddur*, the Torah, and other important Jewish writing. We suggest it is best to avoid the largely failed method to acquire reading comprehension of a new language by memorizing lists of vocabulary words and verb forms, but instead to learn the language by encountering the meaning of each word along with an accompanying translation as one actually uses a *siddur* or reads the Torah. Learning meanings and memorizing them is much more effectively achieved in the context of the content they're presenting, and by relating the meanings to one's own experience. [Click here](#) to learn about an innovative method of learning to read Hebrew, which achieves those objectives.

One of the best tools to learn the *siddur* Hebrew is the ArtScroll Series *Siddur for the Sabbath and Festivals with an Interlinear Translation*, which we recommend for a first purchase (including a copy for each member of the family engaged in Jewish education). It provides an easily understandable word-for-word Hebrew to English translation. With a little help, one can identify in the ArtScroll *siddur* the corresponding pages for all the prayers included in the services of one's own congregation, making them easy to find in the ArtScroll during services by attaching small index tabs to the relevant pages.

Newcomers to *Torah* study often ask, "Where do I start?" Perhaps the most useful place to begin is to recognize that doubt is normative and natural—not a reason to disqualify oneself from exploring Torah Judaism but an essential component of all living faith. Nevertheless, the

secularization of life in our society, which has become dominated by belief in the potential of science and technology to cure all human problems, cannot be ignored. Under the circumstances, it is vital to adopt a sensible perspective on one's imagined Torah-education journey. Contrary to popular misunderstandings, the endeavor need not resemble a novice's mountain-climbing expedition, a seemingly endless struggle to reach an unachievable height by mastering all of the existing knowledge—which is impossible, no matter when and how one begins. A more helpful attitude is that one is exploring a new path in life, aided by the clarity of the Torah's vision and path, with ever greater potential for meaning, purpose, usefulness, self-respect, fulfillment, and contentment—as one goes along the path, learning more and more, day by day.

To achieve this, as the *masorah* advises, find a rabbi—which often is much easier said than done if one wants to learn about the tradition but is not prepared to join a congregation. We suggest that a family can do no better initially than to select Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), the founder of *Modern Orthodoxy*, as their rabbi-teacher. Why Hirsch?

Although Rabbi Hirsch died more than a century ago, he is nonetheless considered one of the giants of modern Torah scholar-commentators. He combined several qualities that have particular relevance for Torah study in our time:

- He had a singularly masterful command of traditional texts—so much so as to be regarded as a modern sage by his rabbinic peers.
- He understood and articulated with great clarity the underlying meanings of Hebrew roots and words in all their variations—so much so that an *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* based on his commentary has been published.
- He understood modern science, its method and potential, regarding it as inherently *not* in conflict with Torah—so much so that his idea, *Torah im derech eretz* (“Torah with the way of the land”) advocated an “... intimate union between total, unadulterated Judaism and the spirit of all true science and knowledge.”

Because the Torah was written thousands of years ago in a culture vastly different from our own, translations can be wildly misleading. So it's especially important to carefully choose a Chumash (Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses) with its accompanying commentary. Not surprisingly, we recommend the Chumash and Torah commentary of Rabbi Hirsch.

- His Torah commentary is not partial or disjointed, but detailed, comprehensive, and integrated—so much so that the Judaica Press version takes seven volumes (including the Haftarot).
- His Torah commentary promotes Jewish spirituality and religiosity that are highly relevant to the pressures and hopes of modern life—so much so that we find it extraordinarily prescient and applicable in contemporary society to individuals, families, communities, our whole people, and the larger nation in which we live.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of Rabbi Hirsch's view of Torah education is how he defines the difference between the approach of secular disciplines, like philosophy, and that of Torah Judaism: Secular studies attempt to view God from the perspective of humankind and the world. Torah Judaism, on the other hand, views humankind and the world from the perspective of God—that is, through the study of Torah.

We especially recommend the seven-volume Torah commentary of Rabbi Hirsch, but *much prefer* the 1999 Judaica Press version, which is available used for about \$250. A second helpful volume to purchase is the *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*.

In time, if one embarks on an extended Torah-Judaism educational journey, the desire may arise to better understand what the Talmud teaches about a Torah subject, especially in those instances when the Hirsch commentary refers to matters that are discussed in the Talmud. The most accessible, easily understandable, and ultimately least expensive Talmud is the ArtScroll digital version, available in a Hebrew-English translation, which runs without a hitch on Apple iPads and Android tablets. As of September 2023, ArtScroll offered their complete digital library, including the Talmud and many other traditional texts, along with a new iPad, for \$999. It is a sizable sum, but when a whole family's spiritual education is facilitated, we believe it's an investment that can be justified by its transformative effects on a family's quality of life.

The raison d'être of Family Siddur Study is to spotlight Torah-Judaism, which is not a movement or branch of Judaism but a way of life, one that regards Torah as the best moral and ethical guide, because so many of us feel an unmet *spiritual need* that seeks a higher meaning and purpose in our lives, not simply the endless feedback loop of our own limited imagination and appetites and their satiation. Our *personal experience* of autonomy, self-defining our morals and ethics as we go along, mostly based on what feels good at any moment, has turned out *not* to be of ultimate practical usefulness. It does not produce our social uplift, fulfillment and happiness; does not relieve our frequent feelings of emptiness, fragmentation and futility; does not help us to know or live up to what is morally most rewarding for ourselves and our loved ones, our community, our commerce, and our people; does not protect us from becoming victims of our own unregulated appetites for material and sensual pleasures; and does not enable us to be the best authors of the moral standards that should guide our lives and make them meaningful and satisfying. The upshot is that many Jews who take the time to study the Torah and practice Torah-Judaism come to recognize that it offers us the wisdom of an infinitely more fulfilling way to live, which not incidentally accounts for the unrivaled survival and success of our people far beyond what many professional historians ever thought possible.

Hatzlakha BaDerech (wishing you a “successful journey”)

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